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**Being Together:  
Evaluating the West End Refugee  
Service Befriending Scheme  
Research Report**

*Dr. Kye Askins*

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## **Being Together: Evaluating the West End Refugee Service Befriending Scheme**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Background**

The aim of this study is to understand the everyday conditions and practices, as well as organisational involvement, through which the West End Refugee Service (WERS) Befriending Scheme works. Befriending schemes have seen little research regarding interpersonal dynamics, thus a central focus in this research is on the emotional aspects of relationships. Two research questions were set out:

1. How do cross-cultural, interpersonal relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and local residents develop through sustained encounters in local places?
2. To what extent may community organisations enable and support progressive relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and long-term residents?

WERS formed in 1999, to support refugees and asylum seekers (R/AS) in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, north east England (<http://www.wers.org.uk/about-us/values/>). WERS focus on one-to-one working and personal support, offering multiple services including the Befriending Scheme, established in 2000 and accredited under the Approved Provider Standard from the national Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (<http://www.mandbf.org/>).

### **Methods**

Informal interviews were conducted as the most appropriate way to address the research focus on interpersonal relationships and emotions. These qualitative methods allow participants to explore and explain their perceptions as well as actions, addressing non-quantifiable matters such as beliefs and feelings (Hay, 2010). WERS' Director initially sent out an email with research explanation and request for participation. Individuals then contacted the researcher directly; from that point the research was independent of WERS.

Eight interviews were held with 14 individuals. Six interviews were with a paired befriender and befriender together (over a quarter of matched befriending pairs at time of research); two interviews were with individual befrienders alone, both with several years' experience befriending. All participants had a minimum of one year's experience in the Scheme (see Appendix I). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using a grounded theory approach.

## **Results and Discussion**

### Motivations for Joining the Scheme

These can be grouped into five main factors. Two are specifically relevant to befriendees:

- a desire to learn and/or improve their English; and
- to become less socially isolated.

Two factors are central to befrienders:

- a keen wish to be useful to others in need; and
- a sense of connection and citizenship.

Further, the idea of envisioning a future in Newcastle was common across both befrienders and befriendees – for some as motivation for joining the Scheme, for others more as a sense developed through being involved.

### Benefits of the Scheme

Three central benefits were identified by befriendees:

- practical help and advice (beyond learning English);
- emotional support; and
- tackling social isolation.

The benefits for befrienders were identified as feeling good about being able to help others, more specifically through a framework of developing friendships and broadening awareness of different cultures. Analysis shows that, while different terms and discourses were used to discuss motivations as opposed to benefits, there is a close correlation across the two: participants' expectations around joining the Scheme are largely met.

### Constraints to Befriending

Participants had little to say about direct constraints to befriending in terms of how the Scheme itself runs: main constraints come from wider problems in everyday life. Lack of time and language were discussed as constraining on a week-to-week basis, the latter usually only in the early stages of befriending, while financial issues and unsupportive government

structures were identified as problematic for R/AS, and having negative impacts on the practical and emotional aspects of befriending.

### Developing Friendships and Relationships

It was clear that positive relationships and friendships are forged among participants; analysis highlights specific processes and aspects vital to the development of personal bonds. Critical were the need to build trust, which requires honesty and openness, the importance of reciprocity and commitment, and the role of humour in how people relate to one another in the Scheme.

### Role of Emotions

Body language and interpersonal chat during interviews exemplified the emotional bonding between pairs, and a palpable sense of warmth was present in all interviews. Further, participants discussed emotions as central to their relationships. The research evidenced a depth to these emotional connections, showing that befriending is about far more than the functional relations that could be concluded if befrienders/ees only engaged in language and practical support. Emotions attached to uncertainty were present in the early stages of a relationship, replaced over time with a variety of feelings. Most commonly, 'caring' emotions were expressed with regard to friendships by both befrienders and befriendees, while dealing with trauma and stress are also part of the befriending engagement.

Moreover, a wide range of emotions were evident, both negative *and* positive: no interviews were entirely 'happy/optimistic/positive' and none unremittingly 'sad/pessimistic/negative'. Complex and contingent sets of emotions were present depending on the individuals in the pairing, their backgrounds, experiences and characteristics that they bring to the befriending relationships, and the contexts in which their particular friendship is evolving.

### WERS Support

All participants spoke very positively about the support received from WERS, both in general terms and specifically related to the Befriending Scheme. There was praise for WERS' flexibility and the way in which they enable autonomy, being supportive and understanding as appropriate to individuals and pairs. Befrienders explicitly linked the positives of the Scheme to WERS' careful approach to pairing volunteers and clients, with consistent commendation for how the Volunteer Coordinators take a great deal of time and put much thought into bringing people together.

### Beyond Befriending

Befriending relationships end for a variety of reasons, most often when one of the pair move away from Newcastle. However, three of the four participants who had been in previous befriending relationships through the Scheme remained in contact.

## **Conclusions**

### Personal Focus as Crucial

It is clear that the personal element of being together is crucial to the success of WERS Befriending Scheme. Participants discussed emotional bonds and friendships as only possible through regular and committed interpersonal contact, as they come to appreciate each other across cultural, ethnic and religious differences as multifaceted, complex people, breaking down stereotypes and working through misunderstandings. Being together, talking and listening to each other, and sharing experiences in the local area emerge from this evaluation as very powerful enablers.

### Importance of Long Term Approach

The richness of relationships evidenced above is not possible in the short term. Participants clearly identified the need for time to build trust through difficult circumstances, and the often traumatic experiences of R/AS. WERS Befriending Scheme offers benefits not possible through drop in centres or other support organisations: the emotional support vital to R/AS' wellbeing, in tackling social isolation, is only possible through long term connection.

This report finds that it is the combination of personal contact *across the long term* in this Befriending Scheme that enables R/AS to start to find a place in UK society and the local area. Moreover, the length of relationships is critical to developing reciprocal intercultural relations, through which established residents (befrienders) are also able to enact new kinds of citizenry and envision a more inclusive local community.

### Organisational Support

None of the above would be possible without WERS. The organisation clearly draws people to the project with their ethos of individual support, and flexible approaches to the Befriending Scheme. WERS should be highly commended for enabling people to be together in such ways that strong friendships emerge, indeed several that outlast formal befriending. Participants report the care and concern across WERS staff as vital to the

success of the Scheme, with all interviewees overwhelmingly positive regarding WERS' support. Training for befrienders was the only issue identified as having potential for improvement.

#### Financial and Structural Challenges

Financial difficulties emerged as a key concern for R/AS. Asylum seekers are restricted to minimum economic support, severely restricting everyday life; while refugees discussed the ever-pressing need to find employment. Current economic austerity exacerbates this. In this context, external financial challenges impact upon befriending relationships.

Other key constraints, also external to how the Scheme operates, are governmental structures. These isolate AS initially through 'dispersal' and further act as exclusionary in R/AS everyday lives, through a range of central and local government policies regarding Border Agency 'signing on', housing, education, etc. Again, these unsurprisingly affect the ways in which befriending develops.

#### Challenging Dominant Social Discourse

Befrienders spoke about motivations for volunteering, as well as benefits gained from the Scheme, in terms of connection and citizenship, generally attached to a belief that cultural diversity is a positive aspect of society. Some discussed this specifically in terms of religion or faith as important in social relations and responsibilities. There was also evidence, at times, that being in a befriending relationship enabled befrienders to better challenge dominant negative discourses regarding R/AS among family, friends and colleagues.



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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this study is to better understand the everyday conditions and practices, as well as organisational involvement, through which the West End Refugee Service (WERS) befriending scheme works. Specifically, it explores how the relationships between paired befrienders (WERS volunteers) and befriendees (WERS clients, who are refugees and asylum seekers) develop: what challenges they face, what benefits they gain, how and where individuals take their relationships forward, and the role of WERS in enabling and supporting this. While such befriending schemes are not new, they have seen little research on their interpersonal dynamics, thus a central focus in this research is on the emotional aspects of these relationships.

Two research questions were set out to achieve the above aim:

3. How do cross-cultural, interpersonal relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and local residents develop through sustained encounters in local places?
4. To what extent may community organisations enable and support progressive relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and long-term residents?

WERS commissioned this research as part of the ongoing evaluation of their work, in line with WERS' organisational aim to offer the best support possible to clients and volunteers. This report is primarily intended for WERS staff, volunteers, clients, Trustees and funders. It may also be useful to other public and third sector organisations who have a role in supporting newcomers to a particular context or area, and indicates broader issues regarding intercultural community relations.

### **1.1 West End Refugee Service**

WERS was formed in 1999, to support refugees and asylum seekers (R/AS) in the Benwell area of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, north east England. Over the past 15 years it has continued to grow, in organisational size and in terms of the numbers of R/AS it supports, across a wider area of Newcastle. At time of writing, WERS has eight paid staff, over 60 approved (CRB/DBS checked<sup>1</sup>) volunteers and over 800 clients.

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<sup>1</sup> Criminal Records Bureau were replaced by Disclosure and Barring Service checks in 2013, required to work in any capacity, paid or otherwise, with people from R/AS backgrounds – see <https://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview>

WERS outline their organisational values as empowering people “whose futures have been irrevocably changed by past events in their home country, to regain some control over their lives” (<http://www.wers.org.uk/about-us/values/>). WERS recognise that R/AS have a broad range of support needs, both across the diverse range of R/AS in Newcastle and for any one individual, depending upon their situation and experience: their most vulnerable clients may have survived torture, imprisonment and/or be dealing with the loss of close family and friends, and even their most resilient clients have experienced/may still be experiencing trauma of some kind. For all:

*“a period of supported recovery and adjustment is needed before there can be any thoughts of developing or regaining skills through study, volunteering or employment. For some, whose physical health, well-being, confidence and self esteem may have been severely damaged, the first stage can last many months, or even years. Others, showing remarkable resilience, are ready to move forward in a relatively short time.”* (website above)

WERS therefore focusses on one-to-one working and personal support, which enables clients to progress at their own pace. This involves offering multiple services, including:

- practical advice and advocacy through daily drop-in sessions at WERS’ premises;
- home visits for those who have difficulties getting to the premises;
- a clothing store, offering free second-hand clothes and household items;
- a hardship fund, providing emergency payments to clients in extreme need;
- emotional support through an accredited befriending scheme;
- the chance to talk to trained volunteer listeners at weekly drop-in ‘Time to Talk’ sessions;
- one-to-one employability advice and support for clients with leave to remain; and
- an awareness-raising, education and training programme that proactively challenges the largely negative media and common narratives surrounding R/AS.

WERS works with people from a wide range of national and minority ethnic migrant backgrounds. During 2012-13, clients from 43 different countries were supported – see <http://www.wers.org.uk/clients/statistics/>

## **1.2 Befriending Scheme Background**

Established in 2000, the Befriending Scheme is accredited under the Approved Provider Standard from the national Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (<http://www.mandbf.org/>), and is the only one of its kind in Newcastle. It “continues to be one of WERS’ most popular services with both volunteers and clients” (<http://www.wers.org.uk/befriending/>). WERS believe that befriending can be a significant part of the individualised support packages offered to clients, in particular addressing emotional issues/needs around isolation in new, unfamiliar and often difficult environments for R/AS. Befriending is not for everyone, or not until a time at which they feel they are ready and may benefit from it. R/AS are referred to the scheme through WERS’ own Support Workers, and also from external agencies, especially health professionals, who recognise the emotional support it offers R/AS in terms of their wellbeing. The numbers of befriender/befriendee pairs varies, as some leave the scheme and others start: 2012-13 saw over 20 clients and their families supported across the year; at time of writing, there were 23 befriending pairs.

All WERS’ volunteers undergo interviews as part of the recruitment process, are DBS checked, and complete a full training and induction programme. The Volunteer Coordinators (currently two members of staff in a job-share post) then undertake a careful matching process, to pair a befriender with befriendee: this can take some time, and it is not unusual for clients and/or volunteers to wait some months until a suitable match is made. Volunteer Coordinators discuss (anonymously) potential partners with both befrienders and befriendees, in person or over the telephone, before introducing chosen pairs to each other face-to-face, often at WERS’ offices or in befriender’s or befriendee’s houses.

The Scheme is regularly monitored to ensure that volunteers’ and clients’ support needs are addressed, and to gather feedback. Formal questionnaire evaluations are undertaken after three, six and twelve months after the start of befriending with clients and volunteers, and annually thereafter. In addition, the Volunteer Coordinators have face-to-face supervision with befrienders and befriendees (separately) every six months. These discussions are recorded by WERS staff, and are not drawn upon in this report. Informally, befrienders and befriendees can contact WERS in person, by phone or email whenever they want to, either for a general chat about befriending, or with a specific issue that has arisen.

### **1.3 Research Project**

The fieldwork took place over four months, Nov. 2013 to Feb. 2014. Befriendees and befrienders were invited to participate in informal interviews, either together in their pairs or separately, however any individual wished to take part. This report draws on all the empirical data collected through interviews with 14 individuals.

The report outlines the qualitative methodological approach in **Section 2**, presents analysis and discussion of the empirical data in **Section 3**, and offers conclusions in **Section 4**.

## **2.0 METHODS**

This section outlines the qualitative methods adopted in the research project. Informal interviews were conducted as the most appropriate way to address the key research questions (outlined in **1.0**). The research was given ethical clearance by Northumbria University through its Research Ethics Committee process<sup>2</sup> prior to research starting. All analysis and reporting is anonymised, and data held in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

### **2.1 Informal Interviews**

Informal interviews enable the researcher to capture more rich and explanatory data than questionnaires or other quantitative techniques. Such interviews are intended as informal 'conversations', which encourage and facilitate discussion (between researcher and participant/s, and participants with each other in the group setting) to better understand underlying reasons for opinions and behaviours (Valentine, 2005). That is, they allow scope for research participants to explore and explain their perceptions as well as actions, addressing non-quantifiable matters such as beliefs and feelings (Hay, 2010). Given the research focus on interpersonal relationships and emotions, this method is most appropriate.

Such qualitative methods involve engagement in the 'messy' and complex terrain of perceptions and beliefs, wherein statements must be interpreted by the researcher, raising the possibility of mis-representation (Law, 2004). There is an ethical duty to acknowledge this potential gap between researcher understanding and participants' original meanings. In doing so, qualitative approaches are argued to be more, not less valid, since they make visible methodological issues rather than claiming any universal 'truth' (Askins & Pain, 2011). Mis-interpretation can be minimised by asking follow up and 'checking' questions through data collection, and it is important that participants are offered the opportunity to respond to a draft of the research findings, before final conclusions are drawn. Such procedure and ethics were followed in this project.

WERS' Director initially sent out an explanatory email, naming the researcher and giving their contact address, and asking for people to consider participating. Individuals then contacted the researcher directly, and from that point the research was independent of WERS. Eight interviews were held with a total of 14 individuals. It was not realistic to attempt

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<sup>2</sup> Project reference: RE-EE-13-131002-524c12c29f61f.

representative sampling in a survey of this size: ultimately the sample group consisted of individuals who were willing to participate, rather than taking a targeted approach to sampling (see Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). Six interviews were with a paired befriender and befriender together, over a quarter of matched befriending pairs at time of research. Two interviews were with individual benders alone, both with several years' experience with the Befriending Scheme, though not at that time matched in a pair. For an overview of the interview sample, see Appendix I.

All participants had a minimum of one year's experience in the Scheme; no one new chose to take part. Given the emotional and sensitive nature of starting a befriending relationship, this was not surprising: people learning about one another may be less certain about discussing the topic with a third party; one WERS volunteer contacted the researcher to wish them luck with the research, stating that as they had only been together with a befriender for five months, they felt that they had '*nothing really to say yet*'. All befriender participants were British, which reflects the majority of WERS volunteers, though there are benders in the Scheme from other countries and some who have been R/AS themselves. The make-up of any participant sample affects research analysis and findings, a point that should be highlighted for transparency of reporting.

Interviews were conducted at times and places that suited participants. With befriender/befriender pairs, the researcher joined meetings that had been set up as part of their usual befriending practice. These interviews took place in either client's or volunteer's houses, given the time of year and cold weather during the research period. All interviews lasted between just over one hour to just under two hours.

## **2.2 Analysis and Presentation of Data**

Research participants were given written and verbal information<sup>3</sup> regarding the project, and agreed to interviews being audio recorded (see Appendix II for Participant Consent Forms). The audio recordings were transcribed (typed up word-for-word) by the researcher, then all qualitative data was coded and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Devine & Heath, 2009), which focuses on seeing which key material emerges from the data, rather than checking the data against a pre-set hypothesis.

Given issues around interpretation and representation, mentioned above, it is critical that participants' voices are central to the discussion in reporting (Cahill, 2007). While it is not

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<sup>3</sup> Two participants did not receive written information, due to researcher oversight, but were given verbal details.

feasible, logistically or ethically, to include all interview transcripts for public viewing, this report includes verbatim extracts of speech and, where pertinent, short excerpts of conversations between befriender and befriended. In practice, interviews started with researcher's questions, but debate often developed between pairs who were clearly comfortable talking with one another. Indeed, the richness of the conversations evidenced throughout the research cannot be conveyed in report format, a point taken up further in the Discussion (see 3.4 and 3.5 especially).

Empirical data is presented in the following section with all direct quotes from research participants italicised, and the following standard academic conventions within quotes are used:

... indicates a short pause in speech;

[...] indicates a section of speech not included in the report, for brevity's sake and/or because it goes off the topic being discussed;

[laughs/cries] indicates effort to annotate emotions registered during an interview;

[to Susan] indicates that remarks were made directly to befriender/befriended rather than researcher;

[context] indicates some background that helps understand quote in context;

\* \* \* indicates the end of an excerpt from one particular interview



## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The key themes emerging from the qualitative research are considered here with regard to the research questions, namely:

1. How do cross-cultural, interpersonal relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and local residents develop through sustained encounters in local places?
2. To what extent may community organisations enable and support progressive relationships between refugees/asylum seekers and long-term residents?

These themes relate to people's motivations for joining the Befriending Scheme, the benefits they gain from it, and constraints to befriending. Further, this section discusses key points made about the development of relationships, the role of emotions in befriending, WERS' support for the scheme, and how, more often than not, there are ongoing friendships between people after formal befriending ends.

### **3.1 Motivations for Joining the Scheme**

These can be grouped into five main factors. Two of these are specifically relevant to befriendees, namely a desire to learn and/or improve their English, and to become less socially isolated. Two factors are central to responses by befrienders, these are a keen wish to be useful to others in need, and a sense of connection and citizenship. Further, the idea of envisioning a future in Newcastle was common across both befrienders and befriendees – for some as motivation for joining the Scheme, for others more as a sense developed through being involved.

#### **3.1.1 Learning and/or Improving English**

Learning English was raised in every interview: the quotes here are selected from many references to English language throughout the research. The strong desire to learn English was further evidenced in the fact that most befriendees are currently or have attended college to develop their language skills, and all befriendees discussed needing someone to have conversations with as important to improving their formal college education:

Nyanna            *and then they ask me if I can have befriender and I say yes of course ... that is useful to have befriender anytime ... anytime I have problem with English and advice*

\*            \*            \*

Mike            *I used to go to ... [where Syrus lived] and do reading practice reading words ... learning English and I was learning some Farsi [says a few words in Farsi and Syrus laughs] ... it was really English language rather than befriending to begin with ... but that was what was wanted*

\*            \*            \*

Jane            *at that time she was doing English at college ... and so she wanted help with her English and with the homework that she had*

\*            \*            \*

Shohreh        *I want to work but ... to find a job ... conversation reading everything writing need better English for everything*

\*            \*            \*

Mim            *because coming to new country everything is new people are new ... and so I have problems to learn what to do what I need to do ... schooling kids and benefits and everything ... I need English I want befriending help with this*

\*            \*            \*

Bob            *and I'm very happy to meet him because he help me with a lot of things ... and I enjoy time for him ... first thing is he's very kind for me ... he teach me a lot of English grammar ... that's my best thing that I want in the future you know?*

\*            \*            \*

Newcastle is known for its strong Geordie accent and dialect, which several participants mentioned having difficulty with. Not being able to follow instructions at times prevented R/AS from accessing certain support services or progressing in other ways. For example, Issal describes problems regarding looking for employment:

Issal            *when I go to work program last two weeks you know when people speaking ... didididididi [gestures fast speaking] ... no understand ... why they speak this? ... no easy for me ... and do it like they give me appointment and I don't know that I no understand ... so I miss appointment ... this woman why so quickly? ... some people slowly like Fiona help you understand*

*Fiona                    some Geordie people I can't understand and I'm from here ... it's a really thick accent and really fast*

\*                    \*                    \*

This issue may be more specific to Newcastle and other regions of the UK with 'thick' accents. However, befriender participants' desire to learn English can be interpreted as connected to building a better future for themselves, and their families. The quotes from Issal and Shohreh above mention finding employment, which they and others identified as vital for economic reasons; but employment was discussed as more than economic, as also central to 'finding a place' in wider society and tackling their social isolation.

### 3.1.2 Social Isolation

Problems of social isolation were prevalent throughout the research. Some befriender participants discussed this at length, while all befrienders recognised how difficult life is for R/AS, moving to a new country and locality where they initially know no one. Some interviewees explicitly reflected on the UK government's dispersal scheme, in which AS are sent to areas across the UK without any choice. This isolation is exacerbated by language issues mentioned above: not knowing people to talk to is an issue of itself, compounded by any inability to communicate<sup>4</sup>.

*Nyanna                    and lonely as well ... I was about maybe six months with [previous befriender] ... wasn't too long ... then there was a gap before Helen ... and they ask I want another befriender and I yes yes ... I want to not be alone and they ... brought me Helen ... I think west end [WERS] do understand people like me ... there is loneliness and lack of language and ... they know these aspects and they can help many many people*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Syrus                    this property ... and it's not really good ... far away from town it take ... 45 minutes to walk to town [...] no I just live alone ... I have one friend [...] sometimes he comes here and sometimes I go to his house he's good friend ... hard to meet people when not work ... I think work job is really important in life ... but when you not have job you spend all time trying to find job*

\*                    \*                    \*

<sup>4</sup> It should be stressed that, across WERS' clients, there are R/AS whose English language skills are excellent, and the range of language ability is broader than represented in this sample.

Syrus highlights the multiple ways that social isolation is structural. In addition to dispersal policy, 'welfare to work' reforms to unemployment benefit<sup>5</sup> require significant engagement with the 'Work Program', such that individuals are set targets for numbers of jobs applied for and interviews attended, leaving little/no time for socialising. Moreover, there are deeper factors involved, since those spaces that afford meetings with local residents do not easily result in lessening isolation or making friends. Several befriender parents take their children to school, but there are issues around being and/or feeling excluded from majority local society, combined with R/AS' difficult circumstances and emotional health: the quote below touches on the former, the latter is taken up in 3.5:

*Fiona                    you do have some friends in Newcastle now though there are some?*

*Issal                    yes but some people Ethiopia people those go to Birmingham ... then for me hard here [... long pause ...] no no no friends in the area*

*Fiona                    but your friend who lives behind the school?*

*Issal                    I meet some parents at the school my daughter friend ... her mother my friend ... my daughter friend from Zimbabwe mother from Zimbabwe ... no many friend from here*

\*           \*           \*

### 3.1.3 Helping Others

Befrienders' motivations overwhelmingly involved a desire to 'help' people who need support. Most befriender participants recognised their English language and local knowledge as useful skills they could offer: recurring phrases were the '*need to do something*' and '*be useful*':

*Thom                    the thing that ... I suppose ticked some of my boxes were the things that I had to offer ... and what I was interested in ... and one of the things I thought that I could offer ... whoever ... was learning English ... that was the thing I thought might be helpful*

\*           \*           \*

*Helen                    my skills are that I know Britain and I can speak the language and I know the systems and I know Newcastle all of those things ... so perhaps there might be a place where that might be useful and I can do something*

<sup>5</sup> Note: this issue is relevant for refugees; asylum seekers are excluded from paid employment in the UK.

\* \* \*

*Rebecca and I think a certain confidence in my own ability that I could do it that I had something to offer ... I do have a counselling background I know this [befriending scheme] isn't counselling but some of those attitudes and skills I thought might be helpful*

\* \* \*

*Jon I used to visit detainees at [a] removal centre ... for a few years [...] I'm not absolutely sure what started me off being interested in refugees [...] there was an Australian [I knew] who started talking to me about refugees in Australia and she was quite involved and that ... kind of opened my eyes ... people going to a strange place and ... being desperate to do that it's not something you just do lightly ... and I heard something on the radio [...] talking about visiting groups of detainees ... and so that got me started I thought I could help in some way*

\* \* \*

When questioned further about what lay behind their need to take action, what emerged was having a strong notion of building or having connections with people, within a frame of citizenship.

#### 3.1.4 Sense of Citizenship and Connection

Befrienders further mentioned 'meeting interesting people' and 'learning about others' as motivations for volunteering. These ideas were generally attached to a belief that cultural diversity is a positive aspect of society, while two participants talked about their religion or faith as important in social relations and responsibilities:

*Fiona I've always been interested in working in inter-cultural settings ... and I love it I just love it ... and I really get a lot from it ... it's about recognising that diversity that you're part of ... that diversity is a good a positive thing*

\* \* \*

*Thom cos I thought I might learn a few things ... which is true because I've learned a whole load of things from Bob ... about Kurdistan ... about Islam ... so it was wanting a bit of a ... giving and receiving relationship*

\* \* \*

*Rebecca            I suppose a great sympathy for people who are on the margins of our society who are not accepted by the mainstream ... personally I'm motivated by a Christian faith and I think it's not just about attitudes to people but about doing something*

\*           \*           \*

This can be interpreted as more than 'wanting to help' (3.1.3 above), but as about recognising and valuing connections with other people. For the majority of befriender participants, such value on connection was explicitly linked to a sense of responsibility as a citizen, and, importantly, across national boundaries, as this quote from Helen exemplifies:

*Helen            actually the kick for me to do something was ... was when all of the Arab spring stuff was happening ... and I remember very distinctly having a conversation with friends about how awful the violence and the regimes were and ... what can we do? ...and you know actually there's very little we can do ... and we had this conversation about how so many people are unable to live in their own countries and actually one of things that [we can do is in Newcastle] ... so that connection with what's happening elsewhere and not parachuting off but doing something here*

\*           \*           \*

Indeed, three befrienders who had previously worked outside the UK made direct links between these experiences and their own actions in Newcastle. For example, Jane had worked with UNICEF in Turkey on a parenting programme, and compared the welcome she received there with offering such a welcome here; while Mike felt able to bring knowledge and experience he had gained working overseas as a doctor to bear in Newcastle:

*Jane            and we met a lot of lovely lovely people and they were so generous ... so it's nice it's good to give something back*

\*           \*           \*

*Mike            well I was ... you know having retired I then went and did 18 months of international medical work ... and then I wanted something closer to home where I could use ... my previous experience because the work I was in overseas I did a lot with medical work but with asylum seekers especially in sub Saharan Africa ... so you know I got some experience there and ... got a bit of insight in some of the problems the issues that they face*

\*           \*           \*

### 3.1.5 Envisioning a Future

Analysis across all the motivations outlined above suggests that both befrienders and befriendees are, implicitly and explicitly, taking steps towards an imagined/desired future in Newcastle. For befrienders, acting as a good citizen was connected to building a local community that is open and inclusive for all:

*Helen                    I also like to ... be part of a community of people ... it's something that's developed for me over the past few years ... that came from being a university student here and knowing only other university students and having this little bubble ... where I didn't really see outside of that ... and that's something I've proactively tried to deal with and this is one of those real instances ... so I was that person who was new to Newcastle once ... and I had that problem I didn't know where to get things or get things done ... it's about a sense of investing in a place because you live there too and you want it to be a good an inclusive place to live*

Direct racism was rarely raised directly through the research, perhaps unsurprisingly as such issues are difficult to discuss, and the focus in the befriending scheme is on being supportive, not causing further stress or concern for befriendees. However, three befrienders mentioned social exclusion in some detail, in terms of their desire to challenge prejudice, to make Newcastle and the north east a more inclusive place to live. For example, Jon talked about living in a 'traditional' village outside the city, and the levels of prejudice he experienced there. Outlining this place as '*very monocultural*' and '*largely conservative*', he often encounters right wing views in line with an anti-immigration rhetoric. However, he stresses that the residents are generally '*very nice people they are good people*', who know that he brings clothing and household items to WERS, and they often donate generously. Thus the context regarding social relations are complex:

*Jon                    just last week I had an awkward conversation with a man who was dropping things off ... oh this isn't for those eastern Europeans stealing our jobs is it? [the man said] ... and I died a little inside and I didn't ask and how do you know that? Where's the statistics? Have you just put down a copy of the Daily Mail? But it's difficult and I just talked a little bit about asylum seekers' needs and stayed off the east European topic ... so exclusionary things are said ... but often people are really supportive when they hear people are needing help*

Jon and Jane both linked xenophobia in local (urban and rural) communities to the need for and importance of WERS' awareness raising and educational work, and positioned the befriending scheme as aligned to such work, but in a far more personal context. Fran, Rebecca and Thom also mentioned that their involvement with the scheme leads to conversations at work and with family and friends, sometimes in general and sometimes

challenging exclusionary statements, in which they feel they are 'spreading the word' about the reality of life for R/AS in Newcastle, and 'championing' their beliefs regarding a place for R/AS in those communities.

Envisioning a future in Newcastle is also common across R/AS participants, albeit largely from a different perspective. As mentioned above (3.1.1), learning English is key for many befriendees, to practically find work, and also to make a place for themselves in local communities such that they, and their children/family, have a future. Every befriendee outlined the steps (often challenging) that they are taking to develop new positions and opportunities for themselves:

*Nyanna            why I went to refugee service first time the only thing I say to her is OK I'm homeless ... but I will be ... forget about being homeless forget about food but ... I will be very very upset I don't get college ... can you help me get college I want to learn English ... and then ... I went to college at Newcastle college and when I get place I was so so happy ... because I need this for job and for living here future you know?*

\*            \*            \*

*Fran                but she is now preparing for the future ... with decorating and making the house really nice ... and the English course at college she's looking forwards now*

\*            \*            \*

*Issal                I have ESOL every morning and now also I do work program ... so because for work program I have to do also ... [goes to drawer and gets out a certificate for a first aid course] I have pass course with interpreter*

*Fiona               well done hey that's great [looking at it] so is this separate from college?*

*Issal                yeah different from college ... for the first aid ...sometimes do one day course in community centre here*

\*            \*            \*

*Mike                because Syrus has worked really hard to get numeracy and literacy ... at college he's done all the right courses and was a bit of a star pupil at south Tyneside technical college where he did his welding*

*Syrus                yes I get more qualification here for building job ... job important to living here and part of life here*



\* \* \*

*Mim Musaf is good at football ... yes he likes football he plays with the school team and the local team as well ... every Saturday we go to the pitch near our house for training and then match on Sundays*

*Rebecca he's several times got a cup for being man of the match ... and the girls are doing very well at school*

*Mim my daughter elder one she is a very busy lady ... doing her A levels ... and today after classes finish she go straightaway to the [name of] Centre and do voluntary work ... she does voluntary work there every week... and me too I do voluntary work there ... we help on the trips with the children and we are going a lot of places very nice places ... canoeing and caving and ... archery and climbing wall climbing ... is very nice but is very dangerous [both laugh]*

\* \* \*

The research suggests, then, that developing English language, skills and qualifications, and volunteering, is about **building relationships and connections with people in Newcastle**. Mim is progressively more involved at her son's school, often cooking – and increasingly being invited to cook – for social events there. She specifically outlined how important it is to her to support her children's future in Newcastle, and her involvement and role is central to their inclusion.

However, building a future is difficult. Since the time of research, Syrus has left Newcastle<sup>6</sup> for in the hope of finding employment; he outlined in interview feeling directly discriminated against in Newcastle's job market due to his ethnicity and status, and perceived larger cities to be more multicultural and inclusive (see 3.5). Further, the desire to build a future was not evident in all situations. Jane's experience with previous befriendees was somewhat different:

*Jane neither of them has a sense of belonging here but their children do ... [second befriendee] says I'm only doing this coming here for my daughters ... cos she was worried they were going to be in trouble [in country of origin] because they weren't very compliant ... and I think ... [first befriendee] is living a Pakistani life really ... she's in a community who ... construct this life that's as near to what home is as they can make it really ... the places she goes to shop ... and so on [...] I mean for instance neither of them watched British television they didn't watch the news ... their ideas about the country were very vague ... except in so far as their children told them things about it ... but they are here for a future for their children*

<sup>6</sup> Mike intends to remain in contact – see 3.7.

Jane went on to say that one of these women hopes to set up a takeaway business, but within and with the help of the Pakistani community where she now lives. Central for these two women is the vision of a place for the next generation, rather than themselves. Further, Fran pointed out that many R/AS are in crisis for different periods of time after arriving in the city, making the notion of thinking or planning ahead irrelevant in the immediacy of finding safety and meeting basic needs:

*Fran                    I think it's a very important scheme ... it's probably not for everyone I know people turn down the offer of having a befriender ... for some people the priority is to get somewhere to live and they can't think of having a befriender til they have some accommodation some security*

Analysis suggests, then, that participants understand the Befriending Scheme as having an important role to play in enabling R/AS to start to rebuild their lives, when they are at a stage ready to do so. This resonates with WERS' own emphasis on one-to-one working and personal support. Indeed, envisioning a future in Newcastle as a *motivation* for joining the scheme is closely intertwined with key *benefits* that participants identified from the befriending process, to which the report now turns.

## **3.2 Benefits of the Scheme**

Three central aspects emerged in terms of the benefits gained by befriendees: practical help and advice (beyond learning English), emotional support (discussed below and in greater detail in **3.5**), and tackling social isolation. The benefits for befrienders were identified as feeling good about being able to help others, developing friendships and broadening their awareness of different cultures. Analysis clearly shows that, while different terms and discourses were used to discuss motivations as opposed to benefits, there is a close correlation across the two: participants' expectations around joining the scheme are largely met.

### **3.2.1 Practical support**

For befriendees, negotiating their way round unknown and often confusing bureaucracy was difficult and frustrating: from Home Office structures, requirements to sign on, multitudinous regulations around claiming asylum, further rules and regulations if leave to remain is achieved; to day-to-day life regarding bills, housing, banking, public transport, shopping and so on. All participants (befrienders and befriendees) described living in the UK for R/AS as extremely stressful in its own right, beyond that trauma which lead R/AS to move here. The

benefits of having someone to 'guide' them through the labyrinth of structures (especially in a second language) cannot be overstated:

*Mike                    I think helping Syrus negotiate the difficulties of bureaucracy and the system ... things he doesn't know ... that has been important as well ... Syrus has to apply for a sufficient amount of jobs or he ends up at risk of having his job seekers allowance sanctioned ... and that happened once cos they claimed he hadn't been to an appointment ... which he hadn't actually seen ... the letter may have been sent but it didn't arrive ... and I and one of the workers at Job Centre both had to write letters on his behalf to get this sorted ... and we've been redesigning his CV*

*Syrus                    so we say previous experience ... five years previous experience which is truth ... but not say 1997 to 2003 in Iran ... because when I apply for job and they see 1997 is a long time ago*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Thom                    and sometimes you've [to befriender] had a letter or ... a bill about the gas or water ... so if you're not quite sure we read that through and try to make sense of it don't we?*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Mim                    because coming to new country everything is new people are new ... and so I have problems to learn what to do what I need to do ... schooling kids and benefits and everything ... and I have a lot of problem with housing ... they gave me a very cheap and damaged house ... it was very cold ... the roof had damage ... and WERS and Rebecca help me very much go back and forward with housing office to get things better*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Jane                    quite a lot of medical things that ... and the children particularly a lot of dental issues ... quite a lot of visits to the dental hospital and the RVI [hospital in Newcastle]*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Fiona                    at the very beginning I used to help you [to Issa] more with your college homework ... now I help Bee with school homework ... now I mostly help you [to Bee] with your homework sometimes ... but then I'll help your mum read letters and things*

\*                    \*                    \*

Yet there is more to such practical support, as Jane points out below. It is actually doing the practical things that are central in developing the befriending relationships, and building

emotional bonds. Thom and Shohreh also outlined such 'bonding' experienced through tackling 'real life' issues:

*Jane            getting broadband sorted out that was quite difficult so I helped out with that ... the process of doing that that was quite a bonding thing ... and I felt very unsure about it and it was ... it was important to get the right deal for her and I wasn't good at that that's not something I was good at ... that was a steep learning curve for me ... and she knew a lot of things about that [...] that was ... quite a bonding thing because ... it wasn't me telling her something I knew ... my usefulness was about doing some research and she did some research and we discussed it together and tried to make a decision together ... and then I ordered it online because she couldn't do it online at that time*

What is interesting is that, while there is often an expectation on both sides that befriender will help befriender with bureaucracy and practical aspects of day-to-day, in reality these are a learning process for both, and far less one-sided. Thus in most interviews, discussions regarding practical support very quickly moved onto to emotional bonding (detailed further in **3.5**):

*Nyanna            we go bank together ... and she help me with computer ... to help me with English*

*Helen            so some kind of practical things I like to think I'm helpful with ... and we had quite a lot of difficulty around the internet Nyanna got a good deal for herself but they were inept ... so quite a lot of conversations on the telephone ... and not always with English speakers so there was this double translation problem ... so I could help a bit with that I could have some of those conversations on her behalf ... but it's not that we go food shopping each week or focus on the practical it's more about talking and emotional connection*

\*            \*            \*

For most befrienders in the research, there was frustration at their ultimate powerlessness within governmental legislation and systems that they describe as deeply unsupportive of R/AS. Key here is that systems do not deal with individuals, which is precisely what befriending does as its central purpose:

*Rebecca            I suppose it's the knowledge that there's little that we can actually do to solve their problems ... the best we can do is ... tweak things ... here and there to make life a little easier ... perhaps make telephone calls or ... go with them on visits to authorities or ... once I went to see an MP with a previous friend ... that sort of thing I used to go on hospital visits ... but the difficult thing is that you can't really make any difference it's all in the Home Office's lap and unless they get their finger out there's not a lot we can do ... but they [befriendees] do seem to find comfort in having someone to talk to someone to listen and empathise be on their side ... be there for them*

### 3.2.2 Emotional Support

Analysis shows that it is precisely such 'being there', mentioned by Rebecca above, that is central to the success of the Befriending Scheme, and explicitly and implicitly connected to emotions and emotional support. It is examined here in terms of being a direct benefit of the Scheme, specifically in terms of befriendees' sense of self esteem and self confidence:

*Mim                      and I was very shy and now I am very familiar*

*Rebecca              it's amazing how you have developed in confidence and just in general interest in life it's wonderful ... having people who believe in you has been key ... having people who say you are a strong woman you're great ... we trust in you we believe in you we know you can accomplish things ... and she's back on her feet now ... I mean it's been difficult but she is amazing*

*Mim                      so before I have no friends ... I have a lot of suppressing my mind ... a lot of stress in my mind ... and all that time I am not OK ... when I start befriending and at start every week I am still in the house but we eat and we talk and talking all the time and I am happy ... I feel I am OK ... and when we talk with each other it give me support it encourage me*

\*                      \*                      \*

*Jon                      there was a concern about going to English language classes and he'd be embarrassed to get things wrong in front of others ... we went several times to visit Newcastle College and look at courses before but it hadn't happened ... he kept putting it off but now he's pushed it and started a course three mornings a week ... he has more confidence now*

\*                      \*                      \*

Again, the importance of learning English is involved, but it is much more than that:

*Nyanna              you know when ... when English is not your first language ... you are always don't have enough confidence you need someone who can help you ... and sometimes I say things ... because the way I say may I can help you [in her job at Primark] and maybe some things I can upset people ... and I come to Helen we discuss how I can say it next time ... so I improve a lot ... my confidence is coming out now because of her ... so serving people I can be confidence so that's really helpful*

*Helen                      it's not just the language it's*

*Nyanna              yes you know when you have different culture [...] so for example I only give smile when I feel like smile ... I can't pretend is very very hard for me so ... it's like their culture [local people she works with] you know but ... when they say what's the matter with you you not smile ... and*

*sometimes that makes me angry ... so how can I you can't change your personality I smile when I want smile but not smile if I not feel it ... I don't blame them ... so when I feel not happy I discuss everything openly with Helen*

The emotional support identified by befriendees came through the act of being together, talking and being listened to; this was outlined in all interviews. Participants often described such activity as 'simple', eg. '*we simply sit and chat really*'. Yet analysis finds this act of being together and talking very powerful, in that it was at the heart of all debate around building relationships and bonds:

*Fran                    it's very much my experience that it's ... about having a chat and meeting regularly and ... and just being yourself ... I know that I really appreciate my friendship with Shohreh ... she's broadened my outlook on life and ... I've grown very fond of her ... and it's very much a plus for me ... but yeah it's very difficult to quantify it*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Fiona                    really what we do ... sit and chat and slowly get to know each other even more ... but when I first came was that OK for you or did that feel a bit strange [to Issal]?*

*Issal                    yeah I feel OK I want friend no problem ... [both laugh]*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Nyanna                    she's she give me hope ... there are times I was despair and she encourage me to keep going [...] having befriender is much much ... better than anything ... having someone to talk it's a help to do what I want to do ... so I'm very happy about this*

*Helen                    yeah I'll come over and we'll have a cuppa tea and we'll chat for a couple of hours ... so it's not so much activities or hobbies in common but what we talk about*

\*                    \*                    \*

Not least, having someone to be with and talk to was a first and vital step for befriendees in becoming less socially isolated.

### 3.2.3 Tackling Social Isolation

Developing personal relationships, discussed above, is one part of tackling social isolation; analysis finds that engaging with Newcastle and surrounding areas is also important for the majority of participants. Getting out and learning about Newcastle, the places and

opportunities the city offers, enables befriendees to access sites by themselves at a later date, through having the knowledge that certain places physically exist, as well as a perception that they can go there, and what can be done there. For those from countries where use of public space is severely restricted, this benefit cannot be overstated. A wide range of places have been visited by participants, including the Laing and Baltic art galleries, Centre for Life and Great North museums, beaches along Whitley Bay and Tynemouth, Alnmouth Castle, Belsay Hall and Wallington gardens, Newcastle United football ground, the Metro Centre and Newcastle city centre shopping areas, Saltwell park, Benwell and North Shields libraries, Durham cathedral, cinemas, the Quayside area and Sage concert hall.

Moreover, it is the shared nature of such experiences that can deepen emotional connections, as pairs could reminisce about visits, and learn more about one another through shared interests:

*Bob                    yes I like football [smiles] ... we enjoy football match together ... and also to be honest I didn't I don't go out very often because ... I have condition ... I am always at home most of time but Thom take me somewhere one day a week [...] the best thing I get from him ... about the Newcastle area ... or the museum ... I didn't know anything about any place in Newcastle ... and he show me a lot of place*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Mike                    you know one thing is to keep positive to keep hopeful ... one thing I remember that we really liked we really enjoyed ... the Blue Reef Aquarium in Tynemouth ... you remember going through that tunnel? Under the water with the sharks and everything swimming over?*

*Syrus                    yeah yeah it was great ... and sometimes we go to countryside and lake ... and cafe and walking we go walking ... favourite place I can't remember the lake [looks at Mike]*

*Mike                    the lake? Bolam lake with the ducks and*

*Syrus                    yes Bolam lake [smiles] ... we take picture lots of picture*

*Mike                    and we've been up Shafto Crags as well near Bolam lake ... remember we went up over the hills?*

*Syrus                    yeah that was great*

*Mike                    and we were perched on the rocks it was exciting*

\*                    \*                    \*



Jane                    *the thing that struck me most when we met was that she had these four kids and it was summer hols it was August ... and they'd just been stuck in their flat all the time so the fact that I had a car was very useful I think ... we did have an epic outing to Tynemouth to the beach [laughs] I can't remember how far into the relationship that was but pretty early on ... and that became a favourite place and several times we went for picnics on the beach ... and that consisted of large tubs pans of biriani and loads of things to sit on and cricket stuff and ... it was always a major expedition [smiles] and we had to get the car right down to the beach to unload everything all the stuff and had lovely times there ... so that's a special place for us*

\*                    \*                    \*

These emotional connections through shared experiences and bonding link directly to the benefits of the Scheme identified by befrienders.

### 3.2.4 Rewards of Volunteering

Half the befriender interviewees talked about the sense of satisfaction in being able to help; feeling positive or 'good' about themselves as a consequence of being able to offer help. Several outlined benefits gained from the flexibility of the Scheme, which offers autonomy in arranging meetings and thus commitment can fit around other activities. For all, a variety of beneficial factors interconnect, including learning new things and gaining a friendship:

Helen                    *and it takes up little of my time and is very little effort ... and gives me a lot ... in an entirely selfish way it's a useful kind of volunteering in that it's not something I worry about [...] I think this is a really nice thing that I do and I've got a really nice friend ... and I like to be useful you know .... there's a small sense of satisfaction in actually being able to do a thing that can be of use to another person*

\*                    \*                    \*

Thom                    *cos I thought I might learn a few things ... which is true because I've learned a whole load of things from Bob ... about Kurdistan ... about Islam ... so it was wanting a bit of a ... giving and receiving relationship ... for me friendship and what I've learnt about a different part of the world that I didn't know about ... and part of Bob's history and story ... that's been a creative thing to engage with ... and occasionally we read through bits of the Koran and I find that very helpful ... we comment on how similar it is and the where it's different from the Christian bible ... and the Jewish scriptures*

\*                    \*                    \*

Fiona                    *so I really enjoy coming I like that we've got a good relationship ... and I like sometimes when it's very busy and sometimes like today ... when it's quite quiet which is nice ... yeah*



*I really enjoy the befriending and ... I love it and I've got a lot from it it's really nice to build that relationship ... I think we have fun ... we've done all sorts of things like dance routines with Bee and making things ... I often get some food to eat which is nice ... and sometimes actually often I get food to take home as well which is nice [laughs]*

*Jane with [first befriender] the relationship really bonded ... and it was really just sitting and talking chatting ... sitting together and talking and listening to each other I really enjoyed that*

Overall, befrienders recognised their involvement as not altruistic, or one way 'giving', but as something through which they also directly benefitted, feeling good about themselves as well as learning things and making friends.

### 3.3 Constraints to Befriending

Significantly, analysis shows that participants had little to say about direct constraints in the Befriending Scheme. When asked about difficulties or if anything could be improved, there was often a '*nothing really*' and a swift change of topic back to what people enjoy about befriending. All participants were overwhelmingly positive<sup>7</sup>. Issues of time and language were mentioned as constraining to how the befriending works on a week-to-week basis, though the latter usually only in the early stages of befriending. Other indirect constraints include financial issues and unsupportive government structures, which are complex, difficult and problematic aspects in R/AS everyday lives. Analysis shows that main constraints to the Scheme, then, are how wider problems have negative impacts on the practical and emotional aspects of befriending, rather than aspects more directly related to how the Scheme itself runs.

#### 3.3.1 Time

In general, befriendees said that they wanted more time with befrienders than befrienders were able to give; yet, simultaneously, discussions highlighted that it was commonly befriendees whose time for meeting up was the deciding restriction, rather than befrienders':

*Rebecca well if Mim wants to go somewhere and asks if I want to go with her yes ... we haven't on the whole gone out socialising though because her time is limited ... particularly taking her*

---

<sup>7</sup> It must be recognised, however, that others potentially less positive may not have volunteered for the research, or have left the Scheme.

*youngest to school and back ... I tend to come to Mim and I live a long way out and for Mim to come to me by bus it takes quite a while ... and I look forward to the day when Mim can come to mine and see where I live ... but at the moment there really isn't time ... because the school day is quite short... and Mim is very very busy doing a lot of courses [both laugh]*

\* \* \*

*Bob actually I'm very happy to be with him every week ... and I spent good time with him ... but the time is too short only an hour or so*

*Thom yes yes ... usually not always [...] when I've come [in most recent couple of months] I haven't been able to go out because I've needed to go somewhere else after our meetings so time has been limited ... we went out much more in the first year didn't we? ... but in the spring I think we will go out more again*

\* \* \*

*Jon mostly functional visits now since he started college ... he has less time to sort these things out but Housing Office and Job Centre [since getting leave to remain] ... it's fire fighting at the moment*

\* \* \*

*Issal because I am busy ... and I go to college and I have to find a job so I can't have time free times to go with Fiona ... because every week for these things ... because not her problem me I'm busy [laughs]*

\* \* \*

### 3.3.2 Language

*Jane I felt shy and a bit awkward at the beginning with both [previous befriendees] ... with the language barrier you don't know whether to ... what to talk about where to start [...] with both of them they had a face they put on when they didn't understand [laughs] we had a joke about that with both of them I'd say you've got your face on ... your not understanding face and I knew I'd lost them I'd got to explain differently*

\* \* \*

*Jon but interesting that you can communicate beyond language ... so in WERS' training about listening skills over 50% of communication is non-verbal and I find that on the phone [with befriendee] it's very difficult we don't get very far but together in person ... we're both very expressive and use lots*

*of hand gestures and move our arms about ... and read each other's faces we laugh we laugh a lot and smile and that helps communicate ... in the beginning for some time [befriender] never smiled much but he does now*

### 3.3.3 Financial Issues

Financial difficulties were identified as a constraint within befriending, having a subtle role in decisions around where participants meet, rather than preventing meetings themselves. Less than half of interviewees mentioned this directly, though analysis shows more tacit referrals to meeting often in befriender's houses, as this involved no direct monetary cost such as bus fares, buying drinks, or paying entrance fees. Befrienders were aware of differential socio-economic positions and sensitive to this, as Jane outlines:

*Jane I was always conscious of and didn't know how to cope with ... I have a lot and ... I have all my things around me ... so my home is my things and they both [previous befriender] had left all their things behind ... and that was difficult for them because they both came from ... not wealthy but quite comfortable backgrounds and ... and this must be the same for everybody or certainly it would be for me ... but your belongings and where you make your home is really your comfort isn't it and ... I wanted them to come here and be comfortable ... but I didn't want to be doing the lady bountiful or showing off ... with [first befriender] having the garden I think was really important with her kids shut in the flat and they did love coming here and playing in the garden ... but I actually didn't have either of them here very much*

Rather, befriender's financial difficulties were recognised as part of wider issues that befriender's have to deal with, that can affect befriending, as Jane went on to explain:

*Jane it's very difficult to tell it's chicken and egg but she spent a lot of her time in bed and didn't go out so and partly to keep warm cos she was terrified of having a big gas bill ... and while she's like that and can't get out of the house ... she's been very depressed*

\* \* \*

*Jon I have a lot of concern re his accommodation that he doesn't get evicted [rent struggle] I spend a lot of time being concerned about that*

\* \* \*

In this broader sense, in four of the six paired interviews, participants directly discussed money issues with each other, and it seemed that this was a common topic of conversation for them:

*Fiona                    and brownies we've enrolled her [Bee] on brownies but it's full at the moment so she's on a waiting list*

*Issal                    it's expensive though money it's not free no free*

*Fiona                    I don't think it's too much money it's not free but it's not lots*

*Issal                    Oh ok*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Rebecca                the oldest daughter is a very very clever girl ... she wants to be a lawyer and she's been to look at the law school ... one wonders you know I just hope that the family will get leave to remain before them refugee status so the family can get a loan for her education*

*Mim                    last week we are hoping [for an imminent decision re leave to remain] ... I am asked to send photographs to the Home Office so I send them and we are waiting*

*Rebecca                did you get any acknowledgement ... that they arrived safely?*

*Mim                    no I send them recorded you know and they said to me it's ... a special delivery ... and it's very expensive*

*Rebecca                you had to pay this?*

*Mim                    yes it's very expensive ... it's 20 pounds for photographs ... for all persons for family and then in post office it's cost for the special delivery*

*Rebecca                but if they want all this they should send you the money to do it ... you can't pay that on asylum seeker's income it's terrible [really outraged voice]*

The excerpt above is about financial struggle, but specifically due to government structures, around which there were wider concerns.

### 3.3.4 Government Structures

Across the research, there was frustration among befrienders regarding governmental legislation and systems that they describe as deeply unsupportive of R/AS. These structural constraints can have knock on effects to how befriending operates on a week-to-week basis, especially around Home Office surveillance of asylum seekers and 'welfare to work' policy requirements (see 3.1.2). Critical is that systems are not set up for individuals, which is precisely the focus of befriending, as outlined in the quote from Rebecca in 3.2.1 (p. 19). It is

this personal element of befriending that was highlighted in terms of benefits gained (3.2.4), and to which the report now turns in more detail.

### 3.4 Developing Relationships and Friendships

It was clear in the research that relationships and friendships are forged among participants; analysis concentrates here on those processes and aspects vital to such personal bonds being developed. Critical were the need to build trust, which requires honesty and openness, the importance of reciprocity and commitment, and the role of humour in how people relate to one another in the Scheme.

#### 3.4.1 Building Trust

All interviews included discussion about the need to build trust in the befriending relationship. For some befriendees, there are particular issues related to what they have endured as R/AS, and the difficulties and emotions surrounding sharing very personal information:

*Bob                    actually to be honest in this time ... it's very very difficult to find a good friend ... at college no ... it's not easy ... sometime you can find a friend ... but you have to find someone always be with you ... because people they make you friend but when are poor or you are ill they leave you ... what the friend will do ... real friend ... is still coming to visit and to talk and ... so is difficult to find someone like Thom ... he real friend to me ... to be honest is difficult sometime ... I don't want to talk to all people about my condition you know ... so difficult to make friends*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Shohreh            now I have lots of people I know from centre and classes and school but ... I am not OK for everyone ... I have one friend [other than befriender] that is OK to visit in my house and I visit in her house ... outside I have a lot of friend in classes and with other children's parents but we talk different things ... I do not talk stresses with them ... I do not talk my stresses with everyone*

\*                    \*                    \*

Being honest and open was a central concern, vital in building trust. This takes time, and it is not surprising that the research participants have all been befriending for at least a year, and feel able to discuss such personal issues in a research context<sup>8</sup>:

*Nyanna            she is open person ... I am open person but not with people who are not open ... very conserve with people not open ... so I found it easy to be open with Helen ... I know sometime she try to keep my feeling but she is also honest ... I like honest people ... like if I do wrong she say me you do wrong ... I am happy with that ... no one is special we all many mistakes ... we are similar about that [both laugh] ... so it's gradually we develop ... not at start ... trust like you know and ... you know each other ... so it's come like deeply and ... openly like proper friendship*

*Helen            I think it's very comfortable now and that's come with time ... so the first time we met with [Vol Coordinator] I was nervous and I then I remember being very nervous the first time I came by myself ... and that's gone over time so it started off with befriender relationship ... and now it's shifted to friends in a much more natural kind of way ... because we have trust*

\*           \*           \*

*Jane            when [second befriender]'s daughters were visiting she didn't want me there ... she wanted to be with them which is understandable [...] you know her time with her daughters was precious so ... my friendship is with her not the family ... but my friendship with [first befriender] is with the whole family ... and the children do talk to me quite a lot ... I picked the younger one up from school sometimes and I took the middle one to secondary school on their first day*

\*           \*           \*

Two interviews went further, specifically linking such trust and honesty with an emotional support that R/AS cannot gain through any other support services offered in Newcastle:

*Mim            is special you know ... well [name of] Centre and [name of organisation] support worker and housing support worker when I have a problem with Home Office they work together ... but I need talk to Rebecca about this as well ... I know Rebecca better so ... at the Centre and the school is always different people sometimes I don't know them so well ... but Rebecca is only connected with me ... the organisation they help lots of people ... and Rebecca is only with me and listen me carefully*

*Rebecca        yes that's the key I think*

<sup>8</sup> Newer pairs will still be building such bonds, a possible reason for not taking part in the project (see 2.1).

*Mim                      and Rebecca understand my feelings what I feel about this letter what I feel about this appointment ... in Centre and school is OK I am not criticising but they are busy and have a lot of womans ... and staff they have no time ... so ... and WERS they have support worker and is very good but very very busy see lots of people ... and Rebbecca only see me*

*Rebecca                the befriending is so individual and that's central to build that trust*

\*                      \*                      \*

*Jon                      I don't think the housing people ... they're very good but it's hard for them to ... to appreciate the reasons why he's behind on rent ... he is online to be in touch with his sister in Iran and people at the housing office ... quite rightly in some respects say well the priority should be paying the rent not paying for internet ... he's under pressure to keep up with rent ... but he's in a strange land and he doesn't understand where the house has come from and how the housing system works and ... he needs to maintain family contact it's important to be in touch with his sister ... she and the rest of his family aren't in direct danger ... as long as they keep quiet but I know he worries he doesn't know how safe they can be*

\*                      \*                      \*

The reasons why someone is claiming asylum are often too traumatic to discuss, compounded by the fact that, in claiming asylum, individuals have had to tell their stories multiple times to Border Agency staff in usually unsupportive environments (see Waite et al., 2013). WERS' training for befrienders stipulates that volunteers should not enquire about clients' reasons for becoming AS, but allow befriendees to raise this only if and when they feel ready to. Two befriender participants mentioned this as inherent within the kind of friendship being developed with befriendees: not as a negative issue, but rather that R/AS should not be expected to be open about everything. As Jane explains:

*Jane                      not knowing much about [previous befriender's' background] that was always a bit of a non meeting between us because ... I mean it doesn't bother me I don't need to know but it just wasn't transparent ... and I never asked but there's always that there which makes it different from a friendship which is transparent*

\*                      \*                      \*

However, this was not discussed by the majority of participants, and (for reasons in line with WERS' training) not directly questioned by the researcher.

### 3.4.2 Reciprocity

All participants described their relationships as 'two-way', about 'give and take' and being reciprocal in many ways. This was often in terms of things they have in common, though crucially not only about commonality: the capacity to also explore religious and cultural differences, and discuss topics and attitudes that they did not agree about, was raised in the majority of interviews. That is, there are multiple aspects to reciprocity: learning about each others' differences; sharing common interests; sharing time, personal spaces and food; and negotiating how to spend time together. Indeed, there were elements of all of these in any one relationship, and the quotes below are only a small representation of what participants had to say about this issue:

*Bob                    sometime we talk about the religion ... we talk about the football ... I am happy I respect him ... sometime I ask him question or ... he ask me question about the religion ... he didn't care is different ... and also sometime we talk about the hobby in the weekend*

*Thom                  anything that's topical too .... you've had a television [til it broke recently] and the news we discuss and we talk about world events ... a little bit about politics ... and as Bob says we have football in common ... and sometimes I have told you about my family ... and the work I used to do and the work I do now ... and you've told me about friends you've got and where you've been too .... general conversation ... and we've been to museums the Great North Museum ... and the Baltic ... and so that's excited some conversation*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Jon                    he [first befriender] used to talk about his family in Sudan and he always used to ask me about my family ... and he introduced me to some of his friends [...] I was meeting friends from the Sudan community ... he used to take me round their houses and ... they cooked meals an enormous feast ... brilliant food ... he was very kind ... and he liked football and I like football and we used to have fun with that ... and we went on a retreat with [name] to a Franciscan place in Almouth ... we shared a lot of things that weekend ... discussions about different religions ... and we would reflect on it on them ... and there was a mix of us there were two Christians and two Muslims and an atheist ... and so the discussions were very interesting ... I won't forget it very thought provoking ... and yes we learned about each other's religions and more about customs and things like that ... so much overlap ... between the religions*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Shohreh            sometimes we think about the next week or week after ... for make the planning ... to going maybe we go out then sometime we talk about ... any plan for next week or the weekend*



*Fran so we work with each other around what we do*

\* \* \*

*Mike but more than that responsibility it's about sharing*

*Syrus and we have family Christmas this was great*

*Mike so just inviting Syrus to our family... Christmas eve we have a family meal ... and his brother [name] lives in Birmingham so if he's around he's invited too ... because I'm welcomed as family in Syrus' house*

\* \* \*

*Mim no plans no we just stick together ... in Newcastle we stick together ... it doesn't matter the Home Office I have Rebecca [both laugh] ... if I am busy I freely and frankly say Rebecca you don't come this week .... and if she has no time she explain me we don't meet this week*

*Rebecca yes that's right*

*Mim this is the main thing we ... understand each other and explain everything each other is no problem*

*Rebecca so we don't hurt each other's feelings and we it suits both of us ... as with any friendship it has to work two ways*

\* \* \*

Importantly, reciprocity was in line with being open and honest, and participants clearly accommodated disagreement and difference as part of developing their relationships:

*Nyanna she's always positive and ... determined [laughs] I sometimes I come with negative you know like ... laughing she's always positive and it's good when you have someone is positive ... because you will rise ... you learn and think yeah*

*Helen by determined I think she means bossy [both laugh] but I think sometimes it's useful to be able to challenge as well as listen*

\* \* \*

*Jane and food is really the thing that was the big topic of conversation and the biggest bond between us ... and [both previous befriendees] ... that was the thing to show me what they cooked ...and then we talked about how they cooked it what it was [...] and then especially [first*

*befriendee] she liked cupcakes so I did cupcakes and then she wanted the recipes [...] but the things I would do ... are pretty much rooted in English middle class culture I would say [...] so I wouldn't say that we developed common interests but we did learn about each other's interests ... shopping that was [first befriendee]'s chief cause of delight so [...] she had these catalogues mainly from Leicester ... and I did the ordering on line and ... and parcels were delivered to my house [safer more reliable] ... and I'm still getting catalogues for saris sent to me [laughs]*

Building befriending relationships, then, is not a simplistic 'care-giving' by befriender to befriendee. While early stages of befriending were described as more in line with such one way 'helping' (with language and practical issues, outlined in 3.2), far more nuanced and complex relationships develop over time and with repeated meetings. This process clearly involves 'work' on behalf of both volunteers and clients: reciprocity is described as a core part of befriending, critically linked to a willingness to engage, embedded in commitment.

### 3.4.3 Commitment

Being committed to the Scheme and to one another emerged as a strong theme through the interviews, and was expressed in a variety of ways. In particular, befrienders mentioned this more often, when reflecting on whether friendships developed through the Scheme differed in any way with other, 'normal' friendships:

*Jane I think that is one thing that's different from normal friendship for want of a better word ... is that I have committed myself to doing this ... and WERS has said well an hour a week would be good or something like that ... and with friends that just develop there's not that weekly continuity ... and it didn't always work out that way but [...] so actually I saw more of them than my other friends because ... I don't see any of my other friends that often so it is special in that way ... having that does help the relationship to develop ... I'm not leaving it to chance I'm working at it ... but it wasn't hard work with either of them [laughs]*

\* \* \*

*Fran I suppose one of the differences is here is the commitment to actually meet regularly ... I think with a more casual friendship it sort of happens or it doesn't ... but this one actually involves a commitment ... on both sides ... that you will actually spend some time together and get to know one another ... so in a way that's slightly artificial but it does actually help very much to build up the relationship [...] it's interesting cos when we first met and for some time I was embarrassed by silences and she would get frustrated when she didn't understand things ... now we're very comfortable with each other ... in each other's company and I'm not bothered if there are silences and gaps in conversation and if she doesn't understand something she tells me and I explain differently or we move on ... so we are friends but not naturally... it's difficult to explain*

Here Fran describes working at her relationship with Shohreh, and becoming more comfortable with things that ordinarily would not be part of developing a friendship. Indeed, this was implied rather than explicit through much of the research: befriending is unlike 'normal' friendship in that it is set up with a purpose, to reduce the distress of the befriender. Yet in so doing, this impacts upon the befriender: *"One always wants to do more, to solve everything, and accepting that that is impossible and inappropriate is hard ... it's the funny mixture of being "professional" but also responding naturally that is hard to get right. I don't know how to describe it"*. Likewise, Jon discussed his reactions to differences in opinion, and how he behaved differently than he might with other friends or people in society, because of his commitment to the befriender:

Jon                    *I find myself defending Islam to him ... he's dead against it ... not unsurprisingly given what the regime did to him and it's in the name of a certain kind of Islam ... and I say look at [name of worker at WERS] he's a Muslim cos they are good friends and he respects [name of worker at WERS] ... but he's totally against Islam and has a set view of Muslims ... he can be prejudiced ... also about other ethnic groups and this is very hard for me ... with people usually in society with those views I would question them or just stay away from them but I wouldn't I don't really have friends with those kinds of views ... it's difficult around what allowances then do you make for R/AS because you know maybe a little of why they have those views*

It was clear that commitment was meaningful in personalised ways, and central to the success of befriending relationships:

Mim                    *because I'm a person ... I never forget other person who support me ... so I do not cut my friendship with Rebecca I carry on ... if I get leave to remain Inshallah*

Rebecca              *yes of course this is friendship that is much more than getting to the stage of having leave to remain ... and I am very happy to continue*

\*                    \*                    \*

Syrus                    *best thing is you know Mike come here every week ... and sometimes he ask me to his house or we go to the countryside ... but I know we will be together*

\*                    \*                    \*

### 3.4.5 Humour

Interestingly, humour was mentioned in a majority of the interviews:

*Helen                    and also we've both got a wicked sense of humour ... and that's something that's come over time ... daft things like so one of the ways that I interact with a lot of my friends is taking the piss out of them ... and I now tease Nishti ... in a way that I wouldn't have felt comfortable doing eight months ago*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Bob                    [Vol Coordinator] ring me many time you know ... she say if you need anything or you worry ... she come visit sometime and see if everything OK ... tell me if you not happy with him [nods at Thom/befriender] ... and I will send another one [both laugh]*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Jon                    sense of humour that's so important ... different cultures but it always amazes me that ... the commonality with humour ... goes right across the globe it's about the humour ... the underlying thing that can connect us ... you do have to be careful what you say of course ... I mean with anybody ... at in certain situations ... some people might find certain things upsetting [...] in certain contexts you could tell the joke if you were sure ... that the context and the person is OK with that and you can laugh about it ... so with humour too there is a culture or ... perhaps not culture but personal thing that you have to be able to read and be careful with ... you have to know the person*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Fran                    she has a wicked dry sense of humour very much does the mickey taking*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Jane                    we did go to the pantomime [...] [befriendee] just could not get over the fact that the dame was a man she kept saying I'm sure it isn't [laughs] ... and the children thought all the very basic jokes were very funny ... and I was a bit worried that they that [befriendee] would be a bit shocked by it but she wasn't at all ... and that was a really good trip we loved that*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Issal                    I don't know ... I don't like parties ... before younger time I like them not now*

*Fiona                    getting too old now Issal [both laugh]*

*Issal                    yeah maybe [still laughing]*

For some participants, humour was explicitly linked to issues around building relationships, learning about one another and sharing experiences; for others, a sense of humour and generally laughing about things together was a marked aspect of interviews, and how the two people engaged with one another. This leads the report to its central focus: the centrality of emotions in how befriending relationships develop.

### 3.5 Role of Emotions

It is already clear from discussion above, that befriending relationships are emotional. Emotions are qualitative (outlined in 2.1) and as such difficult to analyse and represent. However, it is important to convey in this report that the body language of befriending pairs was responsive to each other, people talked with one another as much as to the researcher about issues of concern to them in their relationship, in a manner of people with emotional connections. The depth of these connections is important: this is about far more than functional relations involved in language and practical support.

Analysis shows a general pattern: emotions attached to uncertainty are always present in the early stages of a relationship, replaced over time with a variety of feelings. Most commonly, 'caring' emotions were expressed with regard to friendships, by befrienders and befriendees, and a palpable sense of warmth was present in all interviews:

*Rebecca            I think there's always quite a lot of anxiety at first ... will we get on will we understand each other? ... in the first days [with the first relationship] she was very shy and it took a long time before she told me about herself ... and I felt very humbled and privileged that she did tell me*

\*           \*           \*

*Jane                I remember very well that [first befriendee] and her four children were sitting round very nervously in their house and ... they told me about who they were and I told them a bit about me ... and I said so I don't have any children but I have a dog ... and I could see from their faces [laughs] that that wasn't the right thing to do cos they were all frightened of dogs [laughs] ... and actually that was a bit of an issue in our relationship because when they came here I had to shut the dog away and they were never quite sure that it wouldn't spring out [laughs] ... but it was always alright*

\*           \*           \*

Thom            *there's been real time spent together and you ... develop a real bond with each other ... I look forward to meeting and ... when you've been away [to Bob] there's a hole in my life [both smile and laugh]*

\*            \*            \*

Fran            *and one thing I really enjoy when we have times together when Shohreh has fun ... I like to see her having fun*

\*            \*            \*

Jon            *and I'm quite surprised [the befriending is over two years] because initially I don't think he wanted to know ... [laughs] ... he's a good friend now but initially because his ... he thought what good can come of this ... he wasn't in a good state ... he'd had a really bad time ... even by refugee experiences ... he was really very depressed*

\*            \*            \*

The majority of participants outlined the negative emotional impacts of structural exclusions and oppressions attached to leaving a country of origin. As already stated, befrienders are advised not to ask befriendees about their claims for asylum (see 3.4.1), however emotional trauma is clearly evident without knowing the reasons behind it:

Jane            *the distress of the other person ... because they are in extremely stressful situations which you can't alleviate you can't change the structures or causes and ... dealing with the backlog of the stress and the whole upheaval and so on ... so what I can do is have nice times [with befriendee] and concentrate on that ... having nice times*

\*            \*            \*

Fiona            *you told me last week you were annoyed didn't you because you were trying to book flights ... to go back and see Bee's dad but they've gone up again in price?*

Issal            *yeah because all the time my daughter crying want see daddy ... because he don't come no papers here ... he in [different country, not of origin] ... sometimes speaking telephone ...sometimes Bee crying crying want to see my daddy ... no good my mind when children crying*

Fiona            *because you're on your own it's hard work as a single mum*

Issal            *very hard for me ... sometimes I sit crying not easy for me ... before have family have mum dad they help you ... everyday here have problems sometimes I so tired and crying [is crying, Fiona puts hand on her knee] ... not easy life is difficult*

*Fiona                    you do so well and you should be so proud of yourself because ... it's very difficult to live in a different country and bring up a lovely beautiful girl who is lots of energy and always busy ... and she is doing great [...] and that's because you're such a good mum and you care about her homework and support her ... you give everything to her and that's why she's doing so well*

*[Issal is crying, Bee quietly leaves the room]*

*Fiona                    and it's not easy for you*

\*                    \*                    \*

Three interviews also directly addressed racism and exclusion in Newcastle itself, post migration. Such incidents have negative impacts, compounding emotional tensions caught up with being a R/AS:

*Mike                    and Syrus ended up here in this flat ... after what was a very difficult very stressful time [due to racism in one part of Newcastle] he had a lot of anxiety*

*Syrus                    frustrating I think*

*Mike                    you feel a bit paranoid about it don't you? We were talking about this before you [researcher] came ... and you [Syrus] were saying that you're thinking about changing your name ... that you think being called [real name] ... people think you're a ... a terrorist or something*

*Syrus                    yeah ... I hope not but ...but other people they change their name and now they have job [...]*

*Mike                    Syrus' first priority is to find a job [...] the issue is the great difficulty is other family are in [country of origin] and he's got other brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces there ... and things are very difficult and he feels that ... he should be helping his family there ... but he isn't in a position to do that until he gets a job*

*Syrus                    I want to help them*

\*                    \*                    \*

Further, three befrienders and two befriendees pointed out the emotional strain of waiting to hear about claims for asylum, often for several years, and the toll that this takes on AS' mental health. Only one befriender explicitly mentioned their own emotional distress at witnessing AS' difficulties, saying that '*it was very ... it was difficult to take for me ... hearing his story ... it was awful*'. Notably, this participant was interviewed without a befriender present; this is a sensitive subject, and it is unsurprising that volunteers did not outline their

own emotional difficulties 'caused' by the befriending process in interviews where befriendees were present.

What was emphasised was the strength and resilience of R/AS, and the ways in which they cope with physical and emotional problems across the long term:

*Jane but both of them were wonderful examples of ... persistence ... and overcoming odds that I would have ... such difficult ... traumatic things ... they were well they are so resilient ... I just didn't think they could do these things and they just did them [laughs]*

\* \* \*

The extract with Fiona and Issal (p. 37-8 above) also alludes to this as, despite being upset by her position, Issal is clearly managing in a very difficult situation. Fiona's reassuring comments are indicative of the kinds of concern shown in the interviews, as is Jon's quote below:

*Jon I was really concerned at first about how it was [befriender starting college course, after several attempts that ended due to severe lack of confidence] and I really hoped he wouldn't drop out and I thought I can't ring him every day to see how it's going can I? ... But it's good and he's fine and enjoying himself and I'm really relieved about that*

\* \* \*

In addition, befrienders and befriendees appeared to be comfortable discussing issues regarding emotion with one another, as well as with the researcher, often moving on from a direct question to have a chat between themselves about issues relevant to their relationships:

*Rebecca she [Mim's daughter] wants to be independent you know*

*Mim she insists yes ... she goes on with her friends until 9 o'clock at night ... she is not coming at 7.30 and I say why and I'm crying and ... she come home 9 o'clock and say to me I am not a baby and why are you crying and you oppose me a lot and [laughs]*

*Rebecca she's a young woman Mim*

*Mim yes she's brave than me you know [both laugh]*

\* \* \*



*Issal I go to pantomime I like it ... I go last year ... oh yes good everything good there next week [very excited] did you get ticket today? [to Fiona]*

*Fiona oh no sorry I forgot I was very busy today ... I will bring them when we meet at the theatre though*

*Issal call me before though don't forget the tickets [claps hands] ... Bee like it very much [laughs]*

*Fiona Bee had a little jiggle around when I told her [laughs] ... it's great that the theatre give out the tickets*

It is important to stress here that a wide range of emotions came to the fore throughout the research, both negative *and* positive: moreover, that all interviews touched on such a range, none were entirely 'happy/optimistic/positive' and none unremittingly 'sad/pessimistic/negative'. Rather, complex and contingent sets of emotions were evidenced depending on the individuals in the pairing, their backgrounds, experiences and characteristics that they bring to the befriending relationships, and the contexts in which their particular friendship is evolving.

### **3.6 WERS Support**

All befrienders and befriendees spoke very positively about the support received from WERS, both in general terms and specifically related to the Befriending Scheme:

*Jon WERS gives really good support ... key is that you know there's someone at the end of a phone to talk to if you need it or you could go in for a chat with anyone there ... on one occasion [befriender] was very concerned [about threats from country of origin] ... he was very distressed and told me about it ... it was really awful really upsetting ... and he didn't know what to do and I didn't know what to do ... so I went to see [named staff] at WERS ... and they got a support worker to talk with him about the emotional things but also the practical ... and I had a long chat with [Vol Coordinator] because it was difficult to take you know? ... and the support of WERS was invaluable and essential*

\* \* \*

*Fran they are brilliant all the way [through training and befriending] ... and the whole ethos of the office and the place ... it's all really organised and very caring ... and you have to have both it's*

*no good just being caring you have to also get things done for the caring to mean anything ... and it's consistent so as a volunteer and as a befriender you know where you stand*

\* \* \*

*Thom [talking about six monthly supervision] that's helpful because it enables me at least to look back and think ... oh yes we did that and we went there ... or it reminds us of something we haven't done and we might in the future ... and it's good to keep that little bit of contact between the scheme and the befriender and ... befriender ... so I'm very happy with it ... but Bob you can speak for yourself?*

*Bob I agree with him [both laugh]*

\* \* \*

*Mike it's important to have the support of the organisation in case you need that*

In particular, there was praise for WERS' ability to support volunteers and clients, in individual ways appropriate for the specific needs of clients and/or befriending relationships: the ability to be flexible and enable autonomy, and also being supportive and understanding:

*Nyanna I think west end [WERS] do help and they do understand people like me ... there is loneliness and lack of language and ... they know these aspects and they can help many many people*

*Helen I think they've got the balance right ... so we function very well without them most of the time ... but it's I think it's six monthly they ask you to come in for a chat ... that's enough contact ... if there was a problem I feel that I can just ring them up or send them an email and say ... whatever ... I thought the training was good ... a bit patchy ... some of it was absolutely fantastic so the lawyer that came in and explained about asylum issues ... in simple language it was easy to understand and very good ... other bits less so ... one of the things I really liked was one of the things was the chance to say what was good or not about the sessions ... and that's what I mean about the right kind of balance so I feel I can be honest and also I can say well that bit wasn't so great for me because of my previous experience and knowledge*

In general, the training received by volunteers was welcomed, as with Helen above, though two other participants also mentioned that, due to previous experience and knowledge, not all elements of it were relevant to them individually – although one of these stated that '*it's always good to get a bit of a refresher*'.

### 3.6.1 WERS Pairing Process

Further, befrienders explicitly linked the benefits and positives of the Scheme (3.2) to WERS' careful approach to pairing volunteers and clients. There was consistent commendation for the way in which the Volunteer Coordinators take a great deal of time and put much thought into bringing people together. One befriender stated how he felt frustrated at first, on completing his training and not being paired with a R/AS for several months. However, once he was asked to WERS for a chat about potential befriendees with one of the Coordinators, he realised how important it was to find 'good matches' and he was ultimately pleased that this is the case. Most participants recognised that being well matched was not a simple situation of having some common interests: on occasion, pairs can be made with shared interests aligned from the start, as Jon outlines below, but on the whole the matching has to look to compatibilities across volunteers and clients, rather than direct commonalities or similarities:

*Jon                    with [previous befriender] I felt we got on really well we were very well suited ... and we were introduced at WERS which made it very easy for us I think ... I think the way that they link us up ... they must look at well he likes this and he likes this and ... we are well matched I think ... it's a good system that they have and I think that we struck a rapport quite quickly ... I think I would have bonded naturally with him actually if we'd met outside of WERS would have become friends*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Jane                    I think I've been matched very well in both cases ... cos I'm about the age of the mothers of both women I've been matched with so ... I was a granny figure in that respect which is what they were both missing ... and I enjoyed that too ... I mean I didn't feel that much older when it came to the things we liked to do together ... I think culturally ... women my age here [UK] are more active and I mean just having the car and being able to drive and .... but I think ... it was quite good being older and not having the stresses they have with their children ... so I was an adult without the complications they had or have in their lives there for them*

\*                    \*                    \*

*Nyanna                when we first meet ... I wasn't expecting someone like her I was expecting someone older than Helen ... and not someone with a lot of study but with ...*

*Helen                a real job [both laugh]*

Nyanna            *and so when I talk with [Vol Coordinator] before ... about who meet for me ... I say has to be old enough same my age ... so I was surprised with Helen ... but [Vol Coordinator] says she is much older than her age is good age so ... I say yes*

Helen            *when I was in the process there were a few potential people to be paired up with ... and the one concern there was about me and Nyanna as a pair was that she'd wanted someone who was older ... and I was discussing it with [Vol Coordinator] and she said well you don't strike me as a 24 year old you are more mature ... and actually I think it was a good call because ... [to Nyanna] you're not your age are you you're a bit younger ... you're young for your age and I'm old and we meet somewhere in the middle*

Nyanna            *and we have similar personality so ... pleased I'm really really pleased ... we both like about study too ... I like study so Helen encourage me*

\*            \*            \*

This issue is closely related to the need for befrienders and befriendees to work at their relationship, and be committed to it (3.4.3). It also highlights the vital role played by WERS and the Volunteer Coordinators in enabling inter-cultural relationships to progress successfully. Indeed, there is clear evidence that some connections are so well developed that they outlive involvement in the Befriending Scheme.

### 3.7 Beyond Befriending

Befriending relationships end for a variety of reasons, most often when one of the pair move away from Newcastle. However, three of the four participants who had been in previous befriending relationships through the Scheme remained in contact:

Jon                *I'm still in touch with him now we've become friends [...] we've always kept in touch ... he got leave to remain and moved to London so I keep in touch with him in London ... he rang me when he got the fantastic news [leave to remain] ... and it was a wonderful experience to hear that ... we exchange Christmas presents and last year he bought my wife and I separate presents ... and I just think what a fantastic guy he is ... you know after his experiences he's amazing*

\*            \*            \*

Jane                *I'm still in touch with them both ... well I haven't spoken so much with [first befriende] recently cos telephones are not so easy ... but I skyped them a little while ago and they showed me their new house on the skype and I will go and see them though I'm not sure when ... Manchester isn't*

*really on my way to anywhere but I will go ... but I shall certainly see [second befriender] I go to London quite a lot ... I've been helping with gas and electricity and telephones and all that in her new place ... we've been talking about that on text and phone since she left*

\* \* \*

*Rebecca once they got their leave to remain gradually they became more and more confident and their most of their problems got slowly sorted out and I realised that it was time to move on [to befriend someone else] [...] the second one ... we did keep in touch for a while and then lost contact ... but I've just managed to get back in touch with her and she's doing fine ... she's doing a course at university ... and also working as a carer she does end of life care ... as well as bringing up three boys so ... she's doing so well ... they both ended because they were well settled and they didn't need me in that way ... through the scheme any more*

\* \* \*

Jon specifically highlighted that the Befriending Scheme is different to a mentoring scheme, the latter of which you put in place 'exit strategy':

*Jon this is different because it is about friendship in a different more fluid way... as he [befriender] gets more independent and his English improves and he makes more friends and networks ... I expect we'll meet up less together though still be friends ... and that's just like other friendships people have busy lives and don't meet up for periods of time*

\* \* \*

Mike poignantly stated that "*I think we'll be long term friends whatever happens now*" just a few weeks before Syrus left Newcastle to seek work in another city, and so far they are still in touch; while Thom is aware that his own current befriending relationship may become something outside of the Scheme in the future:

*Thom it's something I'm conscious of and I have talked with [Vol Coordinator] about ... because the scheme is called ... a befriending scheme and so it's about people who want to be friends with each other ... and yet there are limits or constraints ... and there have been occasions where I have been really at the edge of ... pushing into a different kind of relationship really so that's been an interesting experience for me to reflect on ... and I know some people have ... having befriended for while stop the formal side and retain ... contact with the befriender ... and then the friendship I think becomes something else ... and I'm aware of stopping myself a little bit ... up to a point ... of doing that*

\* \* \*

## 4.0 CONCLUSIONS

This research project was conducted with 14 individuals, thus cannot claim to be representative of befrienders and befriendees universally; yet this sample constituted over a quarter of current volunteers and clients involved in the WERS Befriending Scheme, and **Section 3** has detailed clear themes that emerged through the interviews. This section briefly offers some conclusions.

### 4.1 Personal Focus as Crucial

It is clear that the personal element of being together is crucial to the success of WERS Befriending Scheme. Building trust, being open, honest, and developing nuanced reciprocity are all central elements of developing the robust and meaningful relationships evidenced through the research. Participants discussed emotional bonds and friendships as only possible through regular and committed interpersonal contact. Participants come to appreciate each other across cultural, ethnic and religious differences as multifaceted, complex people, breaking down stereotypes and working through mis-understandings: they come to see one another as individuals. Being together, talking and listening to each other, and sharing experiences in the local area emerge from this evaluation as very powerful enablers.

This personal contact closely reflects WERS' organisation aims and values, regarding one-to-one working and personal support, which enables clients to progress at their own pace, and is also exemplified in the care taken in pairing individuals in the Scheme.

### 4.2 Importance of Long Term Approach

The richness of relationships evidenced above is not possible in the short term. Participants clearly identified the need for time to build trust through difficult circumstances, and the often traumatic experiences of R/AS. WERS Befriending Scheme offers benefits not possible through drop in centres or other support organisations: practical and language help overlaps across these, but the emotional support so vital to R/AS' wellbeing, especially in tackling social isolation, is only possible through long term, ongoing connection.

This report finds that it is the combination of personal contact *across the long term* in this Befriending Scheme that enables R/AS to start to find a place in UK society and the local

area. Moreover, the length of relationships is critical to developing reciprocal intercultural relations, through which established residents (befrienders) also are able to enact new kinds of citizenry and envision a more inclusive local community.

#### **4.3 Organisational Support**

None of the above would be possible without WERS. The organisation clearly draws people to the project as both clients and volunteers, with their ethos of individual support, and flexible approaches to the Befriending Scheme. WERS should be highly commended for enabling people to be together in such ways that strong friendships emerge, indeed several that outlast formal befriending.

Participants report the care and concern across WERS staff as vital to the success of the Scheme, with all interviewees overwhelmingly positive regarding WERS' support. Training for befrienders was the only issue identified as having potential for improvement, by a minority of participants, though this too was framed in a positive sense in that individuals felt that some aspects were less relevant to them, rather than unnecessary in general.

#### **4.4 Financial and Structural Challenges**

Financial difficulties emerged as a key concern for R/AS. Asylum seekers are restricted to minimum economic support, severely restricting everyday life; while refugees discussed the ever-pressing need to find employment. Current economic austerity exacerbates this. In this context, external financial challenges impact upon befriending relationships.

Other key constraints, also external to how the Scheme operates, are governmental structures. These isolate AS initially through 'dispersal' and further act as exclusionary in R/AS everyday lives, through a range of central and local government policies regarding Border Agency 'signing on', housing, education, etc. Again, these unsurprisingly affect the ways in which befriending develops.

#### **4.5 Challenging Dominant Social Discourse**

Befrienders spoke about motivations for volunteering, as well as benefits gained from the Scheme, in terms of connection and citizenship, generally attached to a belief that cultural diversity is a positive aspect of society. Some discussed this specifically in terms of religion or faith as important in social relations and responsibilities. There was also evidence, at times, that being in a befriending relationship enabled befrienders to better challenge dominant negative discourses regarding R/AS among family, friends and colleagues.

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## **APPENDIX I:**

### **INTERVIEW SAMPLE**

Mim is a 40+ year old woman; Rebecca is a 60+ year old woman.  
Rebecca and Mim have been befriending for 'just about' three years.  
Rebecca has previously befriended twice.

Nyanna is a 30+ year old woman; Helen is a 20+ year old woman.  
Helen and Nyanna have been befriending for 18 months.  
Nyanna previously had a befriender for six months.

Syrus is a 30+ year old man; Mike is a 60+ year old man.  
Mike and Syrus have been befriending for three years.

Bob is a 40+ year old man; Thom is a 60+ man.  
Thom and Bob have been befriending for two years.

Nissal is a 30+ woman; Fiona is a 20+ year old woman.  
Fiona and Nissal have been befriending for just over one year.

Shohreh is a 40+ year old woman; Fran is a 30+ woman.  
Fran and Shohreh have been befriending for nearly two years.

Jane is a 60+ year old woman. She has previously befriended two women, one of whom she remains in touch with; she has recently started befriending again.

Jon is a 60+ year old man, who is currently in a second befriending relationship lasting two and a half years so far. He remains in contact with his previous befriender.

## **APPENDIX II:**

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**



**Being together: exploring the befriending scheme at the West End Refugee Service, Newcastle**

Kye Askins, Northumbria University:  
[kye.askins@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:kye.askins@northumbria.ac.uk)  
0191 227 3743

This research aims to better understand the role of befriending in supporting asylum seekers and refugees in Newcastle and the surrounding area. I am carrying out informal interviews with befrienders and befriendees, to find out what you think about the befriending scheme, and how it works in your experience.

What I find out will be reported to:

- West End Refugee Service and people who have been involved in the project
- relevant funding and policy organisations
- people who work in universities and are interested in this subject.

Please contact me, at the email address or phone no. above, if:

- you have any questions or comments about the project
- you wish to withdraw your responses from the research
- you would like to see the information you have given to the research.

All answers you give will be handled under the Data Protection Act which means that:

- paper copies of interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room
- no real names will be used in any reports – unless you specifically request me to do so
- computer files will be stored on a password-protected computer.

I agree to taking part in this research project:

Name .....

Signed .....

Date .....

Thank-you for taking part in this study.